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The cognition of grammatical structures

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Abstract

Students today have a need to express themselves. However, there are fewer and fewer students who can put their ideas on paper. Students are embarrassed by this development, and it affects their sense of self-worth. The purpose of the study was to find a method of instruction which would help students access their thoughts, discover their ideas, and convey them to others. The method used was one of associating grammatical structures to student cognitions. Over several years of observation of student performance and interaction with the students, as well as giving feedback, it was discovered that when students became more aware of grammatical structures, they were able to better express themselves. Over several years, this process/method demonstrated that increased awareness of grammatical structures and operations resulted in an increased awareness of cognitions, and in clearer, more coherent, and more interesting compositions. This increased awareness had a side-effect that was not anticipated. This improved performance by the students helped them increase their confidence in their ability to perform, and consequently boosted their belief in their ability to engage in the worthy exercise of meaningful communication. This conscious awareness of grammatical structures translated into an increased awareness of their cognitions and an increased awareness of self and the surrounding environment, which in turn increased their sense of self-worth. It continues to be a major goal of instruction to show the students the value of purposeful communication.

Keywords: Gramma; structure; cognition; composition.

1. Introduction

Current research has shown that confidence and self-esteem are critical components in learning, and especially in second language acquisition. In his book, H. Douglas Brown (2007) states,

> Self-esteem is probably the most pervasive aspect of any human behaviour. It could easily be claimed that no successful cognitive or affective activity can be carried out without some degree of self-esteem, self-confidence, knowledge of yourself, and self efficacy—belief in your own capabilities to successfully perform that activity.
> *(Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, p. 154

What greater achievement could there be than being able to access one's own thoughts and to reflect on them, and then to successfully communicate them to others? We know thoughts are not readily available to us. Philosophers and psychologists believe that thoughts—at least serious, substantive thoughts and beliefs-- are nestled

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somewhere in our consciousness not to be found easily. Of course all are familiar with Sigmund Freud's unconscious in which resides material which the individual wishes to avoid. Rarely do we come into conscious contact with our true thoughts, beliefs, and feelings.

2. Method

One method that has helped students unearth their often buried ideas and thoughts is a grammatical approach that takes into account cognitive operations. Understanding, not memorizing, is the method employed. Formatting expressions (thoughts) into structures which signify to an audience the intentions of the speaker/author is a method which allows both the author and the audience to know what the author is trying to convey. Understanding the grammatical structures of the language helps the writer do this. The understanding of the structures of the language is put into practice in compositions, where conscious consideration of the structure of the expression is used as a guideline to the meaning of the expression.

2.1. Access Thoughts

Thoughts occur quickly and seemingly chaotically, not following any particular order except following connections between various conceptions, much like Visual Thesaurus which moves around quickly and responsively to each conceptual change, which then links to other related concepts. The process is ever moving and ever evolving, continuing to make connections, much without effort, except by changing the focus of our thoughts.

To enter this realm of cognition requires that that we somehow interrupt this process, and capture a thought, much like we would capture a butterfly in a net. Except this time the net is a set of words—the symbols used for manifesting cognitions. In order to capture thoughts, we must make the abstract concrete so that we can see, hear, or feel them. We do this by placing them in physical entities, words/expressions. We must convert the unseen to the seen in order to take in and to assess their content and their worth. This is our way of making our thoughts known, and somehow making them real. In *Language and Myth*, Ernst Cassirer tells us,

> "Human intelligence begins with conception, the prime mental activity; the process of conception always culminates in symbolic expression. A conception is fixed and held only when it has been embodied in a symbol. So the study of symbolic forms offers a key to the forms of human conception. The genesis of symbolic forms—verbal, religious, artistic, mathematical, or whatever modes of expression there be—is the odyssey of the mind." (Langer, translator's preface p. ix)

2.2. Communicate to Others

Man is a social animal and has a strong need to express himself. Psychologist Alfred Adler found the social aspect of man critical to his development and to his view of the world. According to Adler (1959),

> The high degree of cooperation and social culture which man needs for his very existence demands spontaneous social effort, and the dominant purpose of education is to evoke it. Social interest…is an innate potentiality which has to be consciously developed. We are unable to trust any so-called social instinct, for its expression depends upon the child's conception or vision of the environment….social interest must be developed. …At the present stage of man's psychological…development, we must consider the innate substratum of the social interest as too small, as not strong enough, to become effective or to develop without the benefit of social understanding. This is in contrast to abilities and functions which succeed almost all on their own, such as breathing. (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, p. 134)

Ironically, even with such a basic human desire, there seem to be fewer and fewer students who can put their ideas on paper. Some would even contest the notion that students have ideas to put on paper. They do, but they cannot communicate them. And the students are embarrassed about it and by it.

Yes, they email, and text, and talk, but do they communicate? Not much. But they do have questions, they do make observations, and they do wonder about the direction of the world that adults have put into motion. There are frustrations, and perhaps even very little hope—and even less when they believe they are not in control of their expressive abilities, and ultimately their thoughts, and perhaps even their behavior.

Students have had few opportunities to view and reflect on their own thoughts. They believe they know who they are, and what they believe. But when asked to approach a topic from their perspective, and to give reasons for this perception, they of course cannot perform this task. What they believe to be support for their positions is tiresome "repetitions" of the same idea. A clue about their weak analytical ability is the fact that they don't see these re-statements as repetitions, but as explanations. An apparent deficit in this situation is that the students have not processed their thoughts, views or beliefs, and certainly have not reflected on why they "see" things this way or why they believe what they believe.

In order to make social exchanges more meaningful, genuine thoughts must be expressed. In order for that to happen, these thoughts must be accessed. Let us teach them how to access their thoughts. Let's teach them how to bring to the surface their observations and ideas. Let's teach them how to convey their thoughts to others. Let's teach them purposeful communication and questioning. Let's teach them the acceptability of questioning, and the necessity of asking questions in search for answers. Let's show them how to develop confidence in themselves by worthy achievements, which will translate into a sense of a self-worth and will give them the confidence to try again.

One way of achieving this goal is to help the students believe in themselves as analytical, thinking, creative beings. Help them to search within themselves for answers they believe they do not have. Help them formulate expressions which others can understand and respond to. Help them learn to interact with each other by respecting each other's thoughts and ideas, and when and if they disagree, show them how to interact with each other in a productive exchange.

None of this can occur without a method for extracting internal material and "putting it out there" for others to see. This is a delicate task that requires a lot of sensitivity on the part of the teacher, not to mention patience and understanding. However, the method that works, and has worked repeatedly, is to help students learn what their thoughts are. This can be facilitated by teaching the students to try structuring their wording according to structural rules of the language. In this case, structure refers to both morphology and syntax.

What I am referring to are not the rules that most English grammar and composition classes refer to; i.e., the infinite number of rules and exceptions that must be memorized, but rules that reflect the actual operation of the language. These rules are presented in a form which replicates the actual structure of the sentences of the language. These rules are descriptive in nature and represent an analytical presentation of the structure of the language and how it operates. For example, the main rule in English determining the composition and meaning of an expression is:

Sentence – Subject Verb Object.
1 2 3

In English, the basic sentence structure is S V (O)—subject, verb, (object)—object with transitive verbs. All other syntactic rules and structures stem from this one rule/structure. And this simple rule is the one that must be learned and *understood*—not memorized, but understood. We arrive at the meaning of an expression by understanding the function of a Subject = Actor/Performer/Agent/, etc.; the function of a Verb = action/connection, etc.; and the function of the object = the receiver of the action or the thing affected.

In English, the position of the word in a sentence determines the function of the word and how it relates to the other constituents in the sentence. If we move one word from one position and place it in another, the meaning of the sentence changes. Meaning is arrived at predominately by the position of the constituent in a sentence. And this is true not only for simple sentences, but for complex and compound sentences as well. All constituents in a sentence have a function, and that function is determined primarily by its order in the sentence (in the case of ambiguity, we will use Chomsky's system of deep and surface structure). As part of the instruction about English composition, this information is presented to students for their consideration. Many examples are presented to demonstrate that English is basically compositionally arranged as SVO. Students are then asked to compose their own meaningful sentences to demonstrate the simple structure of this language. Students actually have trouble

doing this, mainly because of disbelief, and because they think sentences arranged in this manner are too simple and too childish, and this reflects poorly on their intelligence.

2.3. Discover Ideas

As we know, language reflects our thoughts/cognitions. The method used to access these thoughts, is one of associating student cognitions to grammatical structures. Languages have conventions for determining meaning for expressions. Students who are consciously aware of these conventions are better able to express themselves because they are more aware of the relationships of the constituents within the structures. This awareness secures the meaning of the sometimes entangled thoughts. With this approach, the operations of the language are brought into conscious awareness. By operations, I mean the method by which the language assigns functions to the various constituents of sentences—in English, word order.

This general method of putting meaning into expressions or of extracting meaning out from expressions occurs when someone consciously places the constituents of an expression into a position which reflects the intent of the speaker. If the speaker intends for the cheerleaders to be the agent of a sentence (S), then cheerleaders will occupy position # 1. If the intent of the speaker is to have the cheerleaders jump (V), then jump will occupy position # 2. If the intent of the speaker is to convey that the cheerleaders jumped the fence (O), then fence will occupy position # 3.

Sentence: The cheerleaders jumped the fence.

1	2	3
S	V	O

2.4. Complex Sentences Derive from Embedded Sentences

The structure of English sentences is quite simple. The syntactic structure for English is subject, verb, and a possible object (S V (O). All constituents of a sentence may be further expanded with modifiers, and the constituents may be moved around for variations, but the basic structure, or home base, is SVO. Noun modifiers may be simple adjectives, phrases, phrases, or clauses, or a combination of any of these. Verbs may also be expanded with the addition of simple adverbs, phrases, or clauses, or again, a combination of these.

In English, the simplicity of the structure results from the fact that even complex sentences use the same sentence structure. Complex sentences are created, not by changing the syntactic structure, but by expanding the existing constituents of a simple sentence. This is done by embedding clauses (sentences) within the basic structure of a simple sentence. For example, nouns can be expanded by adding relative clauses functioning as adjectives of the existing noun. Verbs can be expanded by adding adverbial clauses the verb to the verb. Also, nouns themselves may take on a clausal structure and function as a noun normally would—as a subject, object or object of preposition, etc.

For example, the following sentence will demonstrate some of these points.

The world that/ (in which) we live in demands full obedience from those who desire to succeed according to its terms, and those who believe that they may escape the charge only delude themselves, for we are all bought at a price.

SENTENCE

THE WORLD	DEMANDS	(full) OBEDIENCE
S	**V**	**O**

We live in which	from those	
S v adv	Who desire to succeed according to its terms	
	S v o	adv

Relative clause	Adv prep ph with a relative clause

and

S	**V**	**O**	**adv**
Those	delude	themselves	for **S**

Who believe that we are all bought at a price
S v o s v v adv

They may escape the charge
S v o

Noun clause as object

All clauses will use the same structure—S V (O), unless of course, for emphasis, one may alter the normal order of things. Otherwise, the structure remains the same. Adjective clauses, adverbial clauses, and noun clauses reside in the same structure. The difference is the position of the clause—adjective clauses next to nouns, adverbial clauses next to verbs (with possible transformation to other areas of the sentence), and noun clauses functioning as nouns—as subject, object, or object of preposition.

The simplicity of English structure lends itself to a cognitive approach to learning to use the language fluently. If one approaches the structure of the language as a set of relationships expressed by the order of the constituents, then there is little confusion about the simple S V O structure. The key to correct sentence formation is to understand the relationships that the constituents of a sentence have to each other. And this is a cognitive process. If students process that subjects an verbs bear a relationship; i.e., participants and action bear a relationship with each other, such that the subject is the actor, the verb the action, and the object, the recipient of the action, then sentence construction should reflect the intent of the author.

Students are under the misinformation that long sentences are indicative of a higher caliber of writing. They believe that teachers will believe them smarter and more sophisticated if they use a lot of words, regardless of their inability to explain the relationships of these words to each other. When asked about the content of an awkward sentence, students are rarely able to explain what they mean, mainly because they do not understand the structure of their "creation". When asked to explain in their own words what they are trying to say, it usually turns out that they were attempting to "stuff" many ideas into one long incomprehensible sentence. When asked to break the sentence down to concepts and to explain the concepts by using many more sentences, their writing becomes much more comprehensible, and logical. This usually takes some time, and after much thought on the part of the student. The use of questions helps facilitate this process and helps the student to flush out what it is he/she is thinking.

According to Ansbacher and. Ansbacher (1959), editors of *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*,

> The role of the teacher with regard to the individual child is described in a book by Spiel (98) which presents the applications of Individual Psychology in the Experimental School. The teacher's seven functions are: he must observe and interpret the child's behavior and all forms of expression; he must seek contact with the child; he must unburden him in case of misbehavior by showing understanding rather than moral indignation; he must try to give insight to the child and finally reeducate him. The teacher's over-all function is that of a stage-director or producer who must carefully arrange situations so that they become educationally valuable (99) (P. 404).

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